



Hampshire Council of Governments prepares for supplying electricity to residential customers

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John Appleton, The Republican

BELCHERTOWN – Representatives of the Hampshire Council of Governments are visiting member communities to talk about the council becoming the electricity supplier for residential service in these towns, an extension of the council's function over the last four years of supplying electricity to municipal governments and school systems.

Marie Guerin, the director of the council's electricity program, recently told the Belchertown Board of Selectmen that in its four years of operation, this program has save participating communities \$1.4 million on their municipal and school system electric bills.

In Belchertown alone, Guerin said, the savings have been \$360,000 in this period.

Through a process called municipal aggregation, the council's electricity program is now proposing to become the electricity supplier for residential service, something that was authorized for municipal governments and regional government systems like the council back in 1997.

To date, only two such municipal aggregation systems have been started, Guerin said.

In 2004, the state authorized Cape Light Compact to buy electricity wholesale to provide to residential customers in several Cape Cod communities, and a few years later, the city of Marlborough was authorized to do the same for residential customers in its city.

Guerin said that 10 years ago, Belchertown and 14 other communities approved the first steps for the Hampshire Council of Governments to become the wholesale supplier of electricity for their residents, and there are plans now to proceed next year with the studies and permitting processes needed to bring the system into operation.

"We will approach the Department of Public Utilities," Guerin said.

She also explained that the companies that now have the responsibility for maintaining power lines and other parts of the physical infrastructure for delivering electricity to homes would continue to have that responsibility if the community moves ahead and offers individual residents the option of buying their electricity from the Hampshire Council of Governments.

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Powering up

This month, one of the area's most intriguing - and successful - public ventures is on the road selling its wares.

The Hampshire Power program run by the Hampshire Council of Governments has been able to save municipalities lots of money on electricity. One of its representatives pitched the program to officials in Hadley, Granby and Cummington last week. The group is reaching out for new clients, including residents and small businesses.

It counts many satisfied customers already. In four years, Hampshire Power claims to have saved communities \$1.4 million in electricity costs by offering power at wholesale prices.

A big current customer is Belchertown, which estimates it has trimmed its municipal electricity bill by 15 to 20 percent after opting to receive power from the council, rather than from the utilities, according to Kenneth Elstein, a town selectman.

Elstein's not neutral on the subject, mind you. He is also the council of governments' electricity specialist.

This week, the council is bringing its message to Westhampton and Plainfield and within the month plans visits to 15 communities, including Pelham, Chesterfield, Amherst, Hatfield, and Williamsburg.

The savings potential for residents depends on how many opt in, but is typically in the 2 percent range, Elstein told Hadley officials last week.

The goal is to increase savings by amassing a network of customers. Elstein would assemble these new customers into a group and file an application with the state Department of Public Utilities, perhaps next year.

David Nixon, Hadley's town administrator, called the proposal "very exciting." It could be a real money-saver for residents and small businesses at a most welcome time.

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ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

April 25, 30, May 2, 7, 9, 14, 17, 21, 24, June 4, 7 and 11, 2001

ARTICLE 16. *Petition – Electric Rates*

Voted that the Town adopt the following resolution and appropriation in the amount of \$9,880.00.
Resolution to seek lower electric rates in a competitive electricity market.

Whereas, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, by enacting Chapter 164 of the Acts of 1997, has established a competitive marketplace through deregulation and restructuring of the electric utility industry; and,

Whereas, citizens of the Town of Amherst in Hampshire County have substantial economic, environmental, and social interests at stake; and,

Whereas, Amherst's residential and business consumers are interested in reducing their electric rates;

Be it resolved, the Town Meeting Members of Amherst, grant the Board of Selectmen authority to develop and participate in a contract, or contracts, for power supply and other related services, independently, or in joint action with other towns. If such contracts are to be approved, individual consumers would retain the option not to participate and to choose any alternative for service they desire, and

Be it further resolved, that the Selectmen will appoint a representative to a countywide committee to oversee such joint action, and to appropriate a sum of money for the work of this committee and to meet such appropriation transfer \$9,880.00 from free cash.

Action taken on 4/30/01.